

# Church Fathers: St. Clement of Rome

By **Thomas V. Mirus** ( [bio](#) - [articles](#) - [email](#) ) | Oct 28, 2014 | In [Fathers of the Church](#)

Sometime towards the end of the first century A.D., two men made a journey from Rome to Corinth. Claudius Ephebus and Valerius Vito, a pair of freed slaves from the household of the deceased Emperor Claudius, carried a letter to the Christian community in Corinth from Bishop Clement of Rome – Pope Clement I.

The Corinthian church had recently fallen into the sectarianism against which St. Paul had warned, and amidst the disputes, some of the community had revolted against the presbyters and deposed them from office. Hearing reports of this, Clement, who was facing his fair share of troubles in Rome, at last took action, writing a letter to restore order in Corinth.

The ecclesiastical importance of St. Clement's epistle can hardly be overstated. Not only does it contain the first clear, explicit teaching of the doctrine of apostolic succession, but it is an irrefutable witness, in its content and in its reception, to the primacy of the Roman Church in the Apostolic Age.

## Pope Clement I

St. Clement was probably the fourth bishop of Rome. St. Irenaeus places him after St. Peter, St. Linus and St. Anacletus, though some other ancient writers place him second after St. Peter. The exact time of his reign is uncertain – Eusebius places it from 92-101, but he may actually have died in 99.

He was likely of Jewish parentage and seems to have been a disciple of the Apostles in Rome; Origen and Eusebius believed him to be the same Clement mentioned as a co-worker of St. Paul in Philippians 4:3. According to Tertullian, he was consecrated as bishop of Rome by St. Peter himself. Dio Cassius, the Roman consul and historian, identified Clement as the martyred consul Titus Flavius Clemens, but his account is considered untrustworthy, and it is uncertain whether the tradition of Clement's martyrdom is accurate.

Interestingly, Clement is the protagonist of an ancient work of didactic fiction, the Pseudo-Clementines, probably written in Syria in the early third century. In the story, Clement is a son of the imperial family who hopes to find truth in the various

schools of philosophy, but is disappointed. He eventually seeks out St. Peter and is converted. This narrative, which follows Clement's adventures as Peter's missionary companion, leads up to what purports to be a collection of the missionary sermons of St. Peter, espousing a sort of heretical Judaist-Christian theology. In another fragment of the Pseudo-Clementines, Clement's family is dispersed under strange circumstances and after much searching is eventually reunited with the help of St. Peter.

Some writings have been ascribed to Clement which are now thought to be inauthentic. The second Epistle to the Corinthians some believe to be a letter of Pope Soter, though in fact it is not a letter at all but the oldest extant Christian sermon, possibly given in Corinth. Both Eusebius and St. Jerome doubted that it was written by Clement. The homily is fairly general, dealing with Christ as Judge of the living and the dead, the Church as the bride of Christ, and the need for repentance and good works.

There are also two letters addressed to virgins (the unmarried of both sexes). While they were attributed to Clement, they really originate from the first half of the third century. A Coptic fragment of the first letter refers to St. Athanasius as the author. The writer praises celibacy as a higher state of life, the practitioners of which will have a higher place in heaven; yet he also emphasizes that virginity is spiritually barren without works of charity, and that celibacy carries serious responsibilities. He opposes the practice of virgins of both sexes living communally under the same roof.

### **The First Epistle - Date and Reception**

Legends and spurious attributions aside, Clement's reputation as an Apostolic Father is based almost solely on his one authentic writing. This is his [First Epistle to the Corinthians](#), "the earliest piece of Christian literature outside the New Testament for which the name, position and date of the author are historically attested" [Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I, 1950, p. 43]. It comes down to us in the original Greek as well as in Latin and Syriac.

A common opinion holds that the letter was written during a persecution of Christians by the emperor Domitian, because Clement explains his tardiness in writing as "owing... to the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves." Following a description of the persecutions under Nero, he writes: "For we are struggling on the same arena, and the same conflict is assigned to both of us."

However, Jurgens dates both the letter and Clement's papacy earlier, around the year 80. Given that there is apparently little evidence for a persecution under Domitian, he suggests that the calamity mentioned by Clement may have been not a persecution but the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79. As further support for the earlier date he uses the probable ages of Claudius Ephebus and Valerius Vito, the men Clement names as legates [*Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, 1970, p. 7].

The letter does not use Clement's name, but is addressed from "the Church of God which sojourns at Rome." It does not seem that the Corinthians had asked Rome to intervene. [Note: See the comments for further clarification on this point.] For this reason it is compelling that Clement does not apologize for meddling, as would be appropriate were his letter motivated merely by the brotherly solicitude of an equal. Rather, he apologizes for not writing sooner, as though intervening to restore order were his duty. On the other hand, if the Corinthians did ask Rome to intervene – rather than appealing to the still-living Apostle John – that in itself would be a powerful testament to the authority accorded Rome at the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

Clement's clearest claim to special authority comes towards the end of the letter, when he says that if the recipients of his letter disobey him they will be guilty of sin:

Receive our counsel, and ye shall have no occasion of regret.... But if certain persons should be disobedient unto the words spoken by Him through us, let them understand that they will entangle themselves in no slight transgression and danger, but we shall be guiltless of this sin.

And again: "For ye will give us great joy and gladness, if ye render obedience unto the things written by us through the Holy Spirit."

[Note that a passage just before the letter's end, including the above two quotes and a lengthy concluding prayer believed to have been a formal liturgical prayer of the Church of Rome, is missing from our 19<sup>th</sup>-century edition of the text, but can be found in most other editions, including [this one](#).]

Clement seems to have intended the letter to be read publicly, and we know that decades later it was still read to the congregation during worship. St. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth around 170, wrote in a letter to Pope Soter:

Today we observed the holy day of the Lord and read out your letter, which we shall continue to read from time to time for our admonition, as we do with that formerly sent to us through Clement.

That the Corinthians gave the letter such a welcome tells us that they could hardly have thought Rome was exceeding its authority. Indeed, Clement's letter was held in such high regard that in the early fourth century, Eusebius could write that it was read publicly not only in Corinth but "in many churches both in the days of old and in our time."

### **The First Epistle - Doctrinal Content**

From the beginning of the letter, Clement singles out jealousy and envy as the cause of persecutions as well as of internal discord. He recounts the martyrdoms of St. Peter and St. Paul, and reminds the Corinthians of many others who "received a noble reward" for their endurance amidst torments. He makes special mention of the many women who faced martyrdom bravely. Of historical interest, St. Paul is referred to as having "gone to the extremity of the West," which supports the tradition of his having journeyed to Spain, according to his intention stated in Romans 15.

Clement urges the Corinthians to faith and good works. While we are justified not by our own virtues and works, "but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men," this is not an excuse to refrain from good works:

What shall we do, then, brethren? Shall we become slothful in well-doing, and cease from the practice of love? God forbid that any such course should be followed by us! But rather let us hasten with all energy and readiness of mind to perform every good work.

One of the good works most prized by Clement is hospitality; he offers reflections on how this virtue was practiced by Lot and Rahab. He reminds his audience of the eternal reward Christians will receive for their perseverance in good works, which they are enabled to do by the grace of Jesus Christ. One of Clement's more interesting rhetorical devices is his reference to the ancient phoenix myth, the earliest use of this popular symbol of the general resurrection in early Christian art and literature.

Humility is seen as the antidote to envy and jealousy and the key to Christian unity. Christians are urged to “act the part of soldiers” under the leadership of Christ, and to behave humbly according to one’s position: “The great cannot subsist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a kind of mixture in all things, and thence arises mutual advantage.” As the feet and head depend on one another, so should Christians “work harmoniously together... under one common rule for the preservation of the whole body.”

If some are great and some small, some strong and some weak, the great are not to lord it over the small, nor are the weak to resent the strong, but all are to give the glory to God in the knowledge of “who and what manner of beings we came into the world, as it were out of a sepulchre, and from utter darkness.”

This leads into Clement’s discussion of church hierarchy and the prerogatives of ministers, whose most important function is the celebration of the liturgy. Urging the Christian community to respect the order set down by God, Clement makes the first use of the word “layman” in Christian literature:

To the high priest, indeed, proper ministrations are allotted, to the priests a proper place is appointed, and upon the Levites their proper services are imposed. The layman is bound by the ordinances for the laity.

Clement lays out clearly the grounds for a hierarchy of Christian ministers based on apostolic succession. Chapter 42 is worth quoting at length:

The Apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ was sent from God. Christ, therefore, is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both of these orderly arrangements, then, are by God’s will.... Through countryside and city they preached; and they appointed their earliest converts [literally *first-fruits*], testing them by the spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers.

He continues in Chapter 44:

Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason,

therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all, cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry. For our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties.

Clement points out that not only does the uprising in the Corinthian church harm Christians but, because word of it has reached non-Christians, those who foment discord give scandal to them and “heap blasphemies on the name of the Lord.” Those responsible are urged not to harden their hearts but rather to repent, seek the forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ and “submit to the presbyters...bending your knees in spirit of humility [literally *bending the knees of your hearts*].”

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